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ABSTRACT

This booklet contains four articles, from the perspective of both parents and teachers, concerned with learning in the early grades. "From Kindergarten to Grade One: Making the Transition" (J. Ward), is a teacher's narrative on the importance of creating a child-centered classroom and an integrated, play-based curriculum. This article also provides answers to questions and concerns anticipated from others, and emphasizes the involvement of parents. The next article is "Discovery Education is Alive and Well: A Parent's Perspective" (D. G. Thomas), in which a parent expresses appreciation of a teacher-created learning environment that emphasizes hands-on exercises. The third article is written jointly by two teachers: "Multi-Grade Teaching in an Activity-Based Classroom" (M. Brewer and B. Jardine), and describes a team teaching situation. The students ranged in age from 4 to 8 years, and the learning was entirely activity-based. The last article, "K-2: A Parent's View" (V. French), presents a parent's impressions of the multi-grade classroom described in the preceding article, and describes the successful inclusion of her multiply handicapped son. (BAC)

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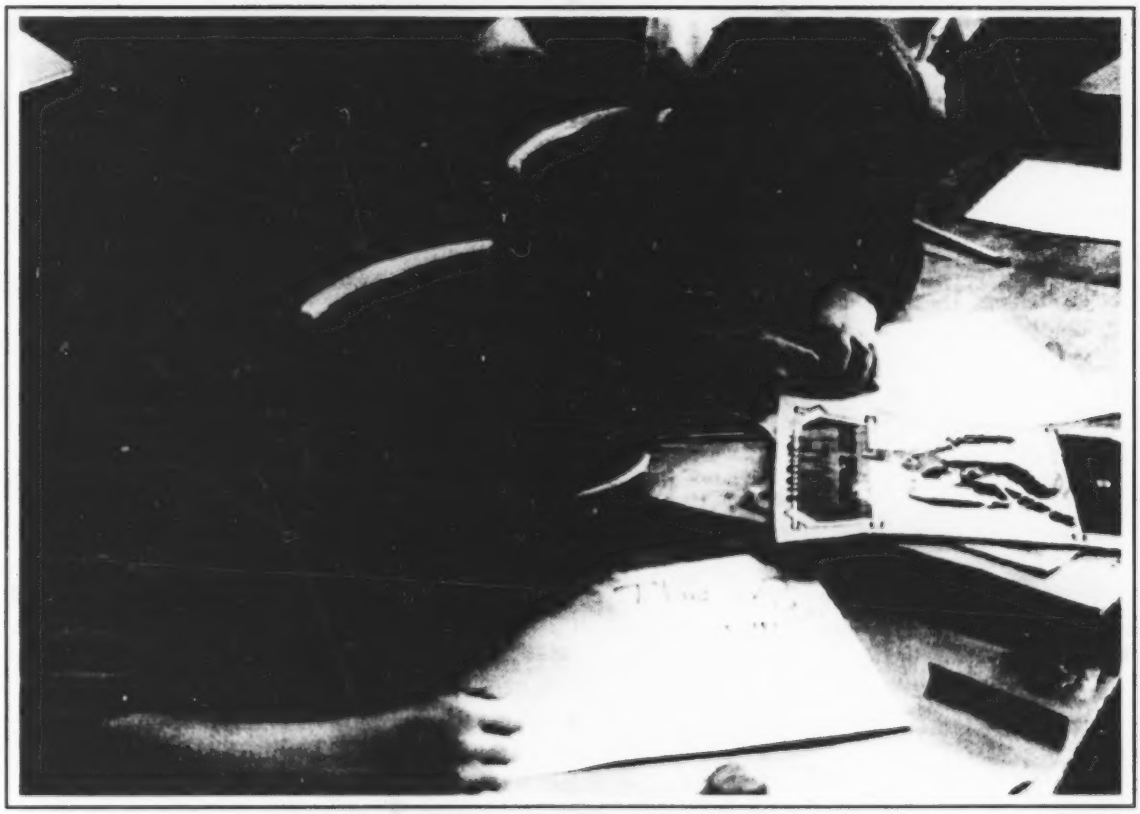
Learning in the Early Grades

Parents and Teachers Talk



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From Kindergarten to Grade One: Making the Transition

On September 8th my classroom was once again filled with bright, eager five and six year olds, ready for a busy, enjoyable and challenging year. This same group of children had entered public play-based kindergarten only one short year before, a kindergarten over-flowing with a wide variety of hands-on learning activities, activities that involved talking, discovering, listening, experimenting, dramatizing, cutting, pasting, painting and much, much more.

Kindergarten implementation was one of four reasons why I decided to step back and take a good look at myself as an educator. My return to UNB's DAUS program, my boredom with the present programs, and the current thinking of multi-aged grouping also served as catalysts for my change. I feel that it is important for teachers to think about, talk about, review and assess their work constantly. We should strive to learn something new every day, something that will somehow, in some way, make what we are doing more effective. Moulding young lives, as we do, is a very prestigious task and a challenging responsibility. It is important for us as educators to make learning as natural as we can. This is something that, as I look back, I have not done successfully.

In January 1992, after a great deal of thought, I began to make a change in my classroom. At that time I was enrolled in an education course entitled "The Integrated

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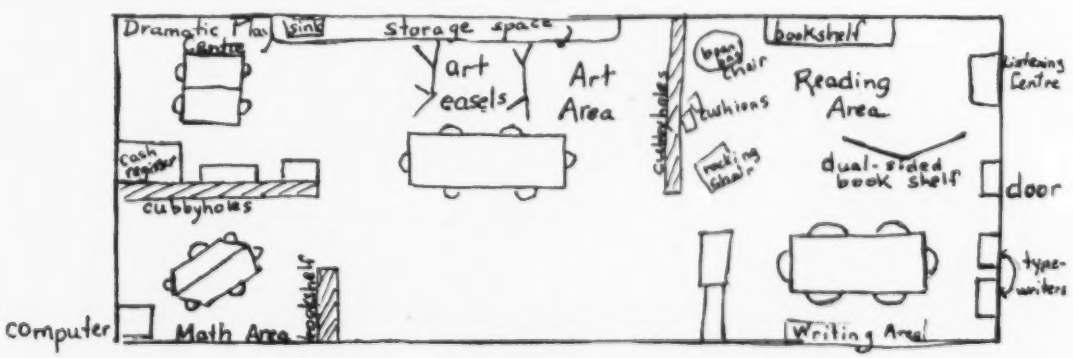
Day." This course stresses the importance of an integrated curriculum, as well as children making choices and being active learners. So, through both research and trial and error, I integrated the subjects of the grade one curriculum and transformed my classroom. I was amazed at how much the children were learning with the teacher acting as a facilitator to learning. The children were busy, happy and, best of all, challenged. They were learning from each other and from their own observations, experimentations, and explorations. I was convinced that children could learn through engaging in a variety of activities.

However, I felt the physical structure of my classroom hindered child-centred learning. So once again I read research on creating a child-centred classroom, talked to an early childhood professor at UNB and visited another teacher who seemed to be moving in the same direction as I. I decided that in order to make the transition from kindergarten to grade one a smoother one for both the students and myself, I needed to change the physical set-up of my classroom.

Some people might say, play-based kindergarten has been around for years; why are you making such a big change now? This is true. However, kindergarten has not been visible to educators and therefore we may have ignored its positive effects. Also, although the play-based curriculum has been around for years, I think many kindergartens have followed a more formal approach. It was not until kindergartens entered our schools that the play-based curriculum has become the standard and the program has been visible to us.

My Classroom Today

As you can see from the floor plan, I now have five permanent learning areas in my classroom. The children are encouraged to work in all the centres; however, it is their choice where they go each day.



Questions and Concerns Others May Have:

How do you ensure that children visit a variety of learning areas?

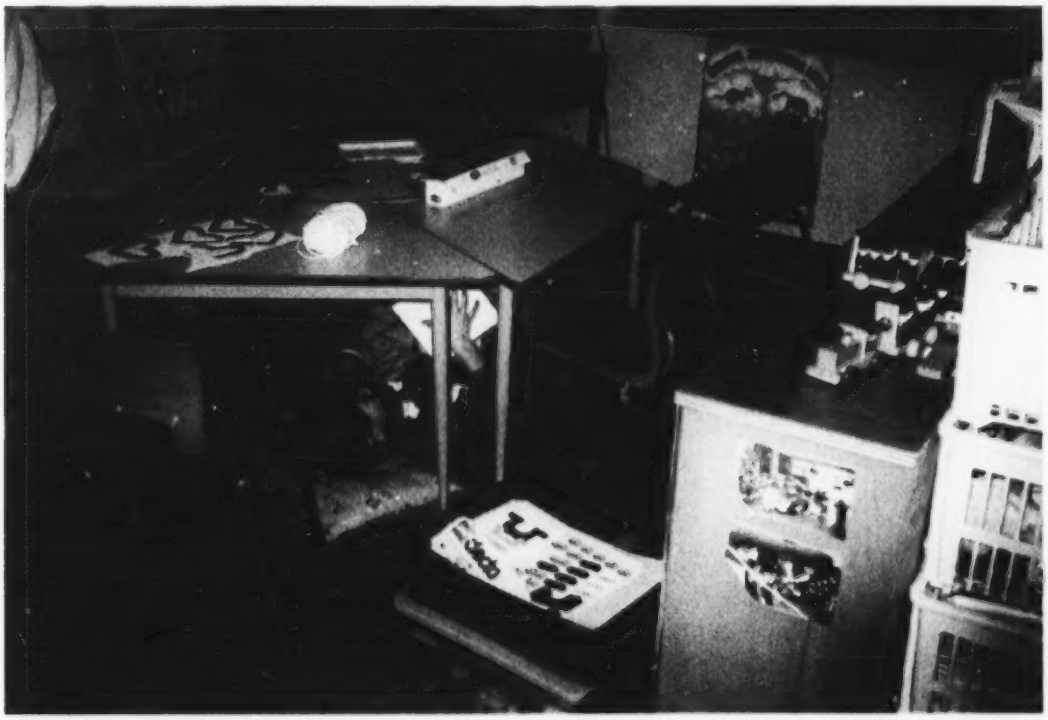
It is important for me to have a record of where each child works each day. I use a "sign-in" system for the students. This helps me decide whom I need to encourage to go to different learning (work) areas in the classroom, so that all areas of the curriculum are covered. I also try to ensure that reading and writing are happening in every work area. This is promoted by having good literature and writing materials available at every work area.

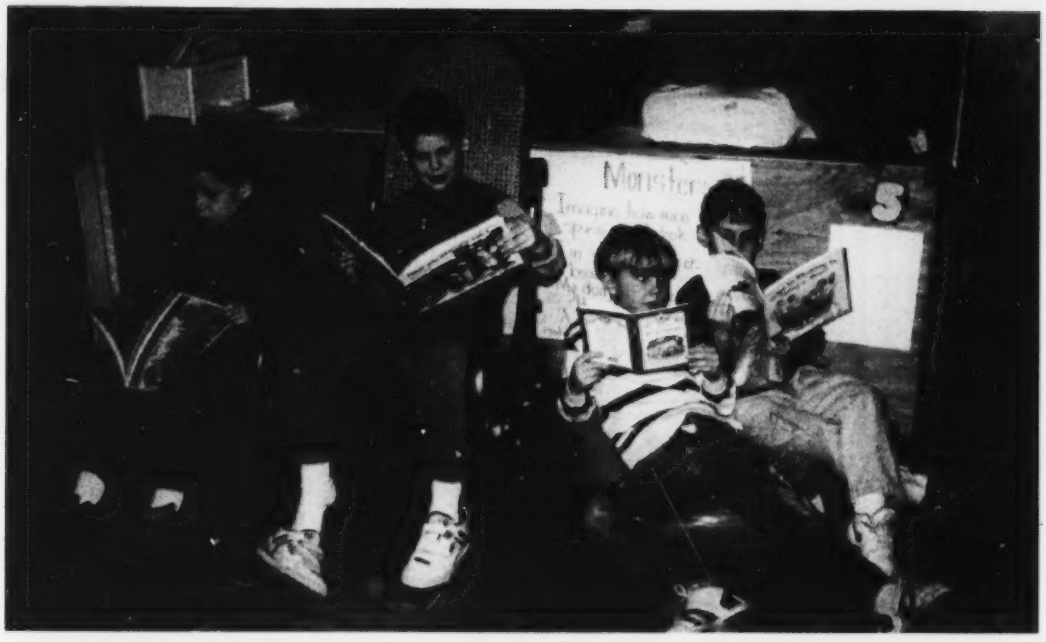
The children are learning about reading, writing, mathematics and scientific concepts in a very natural way, very much like the way they learned to talk. Learning does not become disjointed by being broken down into small pieces.

How Does a Teacher Evaluate and Assess Progress Without Using Formal Testing?

Formal tests are very tangible and are good to have to show parents what their child can or cannot do. However, they are not designed for all children and their individual differences.

I feel it is important to be constantly observing and interacting with the children. I record these observations and interactions, using anecdotal records.





The children also have their own personal portfolios which contain their work. These serve as an excellent form of evaluation for them, as well as for me. All material is dated, which makes it easier to evaluate.

Using these methods of evaluation, progress can be tracked for each individual child with their specific needs.

How Can One Teacher Implement This Program and Make It Successful?

I think we have to realize that this program requires a lot of work and planning on the part of the teacher. We must have a clear understanding of the curriculum skills required in grade one when setting up our work areas.

Children need to learn and practise the routine, which is very similar to that in kindergarten.

Parents need to be encouraged and welcome to participate in a classroom where the children are fully engaged in learning. Parents should be our partners in their child's education, both in and out of the classroom!

Parents being actively involved in our classrooms can also help to calm any concerns they may have about our classroom set-up. Once they see for themselves how much the children are learning, they won't question the notion of their children "playing" all day.

I think parents recall their own schooling, when students sat in rows and only talked when instructed to, being very passive learners.

We have to "re-educate" our parents and help them realize that play (activity) is work to a child, and that children can be happy and learn at the same time.

I realize that many people will still have questions about activity-based classrooms. I hope that through this article I have challenged some others towards a change. If you are still unsure of what to do, what roads to follow, look to your students; they will show you the way.

Jennifer Ward

Discovery Education is Alive and Well: A Parent's Perspective

Imagine, if you will, a little preschool boy donning a black cape (over P.J.'s), a black mask, a Ninja Turtle helmet; sword-fisted, riding a bike at 7:45 in the morning, with his mother running frantically at his side. Imagine the same mother encouraging this same little boy to explore the wonders of a pencil, the magic of a book, the beauty of the written word or the music of a violin. You can't imagine? This little boy is a curious explorer acting on his immediate surroundings, making important discoveries which are meaningful to him alone.

A favourite book in our family is *Quick as a Cricket*, by Audrey Wood, which illustrates a little boy and the many childhood characters he possesses. Some of the characters alluded to, which are beautifully illustrated, have captions which depict the essence of childhood, such as: "I'm as wild as a chimpanzee, I'm as tame as a poodle, I'm as busy as a bee — put them all together, and you've got me." (Audrey Wood, 1982). This little boy was, to put it bluntly, "wild as a chimpanzee" upon entering the school system. Standing at the door on the first day of school, I was pleasantly comforted to see he was surrounded by a few fellow chimpanzees. I love this little boy, and I must admit that I was frightened that the school system might not channel his free spirit, which he so adamantly earned and developed. How could a classroom environment meet the needs of this little boy? Certainly rote repetition of the ABC's and 1,2,3's couldn't hope to accomplish this task or appeal to this little boy's imagination.

I could not possibly foretell what the recipe to success might be, or whether such a recipe even existed.

I expected this little boy to complain a little or mention that he wasn't too thrilled about the school system. I waited and waited. I am still waiting. Instead, he treasurers the hours that he spends in school and counts the hours that he has to wait to go to school. He insists that he stay for lunch and barely eats when he does come home, in anticipation to get to the school grounds to play with his fellow chimp . . . buddies.

So, what is the secret? As an outside observer, I know that my child appears "happy as a lark." (Audrey Wood, 1982). I feel that the teacher is enthusiastic about the progress of her little pupils and offers them positive feedback in a relaxed, non-threatening climate. She encourages success. These are all elements which make for a positive learning experience. But the underlying quality in this little boy's education is that he is allowed to discover learning and to find experiences which are important to him alone. For instance, the way he forms the letter "e" is probably different from the way another child might form this very same letter. He has been allowed the opportunity to figure out for himself how this task should fit with his experiences. There was no forced demonstration . . . there could not have been . . . not for this little boy. Instead, there were alternatives provided within carefully planned activities to encourage the acquisition of the many skills he is now successfully being taught. This little boy, who was always curious as a little preschooler, was given the opportunity to continue with this special curiosity (possessed by most children), and now can be a little explorer in the classroom.

Some of the philosophical ideas of Rousseau, Piaget and Dewey are carefully carried out in Jennifer Ward's classroom. The pupils are actively involved in hands-on exercises and are not forced to carry out mundane, automatized routines, which could easily squelch their desire for learning. If the learning environment does not overlap with the children's experiences, then chances are they will be turned off learning at this very impressionable age.

Grade 1, I feel, sets the tone and is a cornerstone of learning. It is in the early years that the child will decide if learning fits with his own experiences and whether school is important to him. It is here that the child's destiny for successful scholastic achievement begins to be established.

This little boy likes his teachers, likes letters, likes numbers, likes . . . school. He still likes being "wild as a chimpanzee," but also enjoys being "busy as a bee" and "tame as a poodle" — I think!

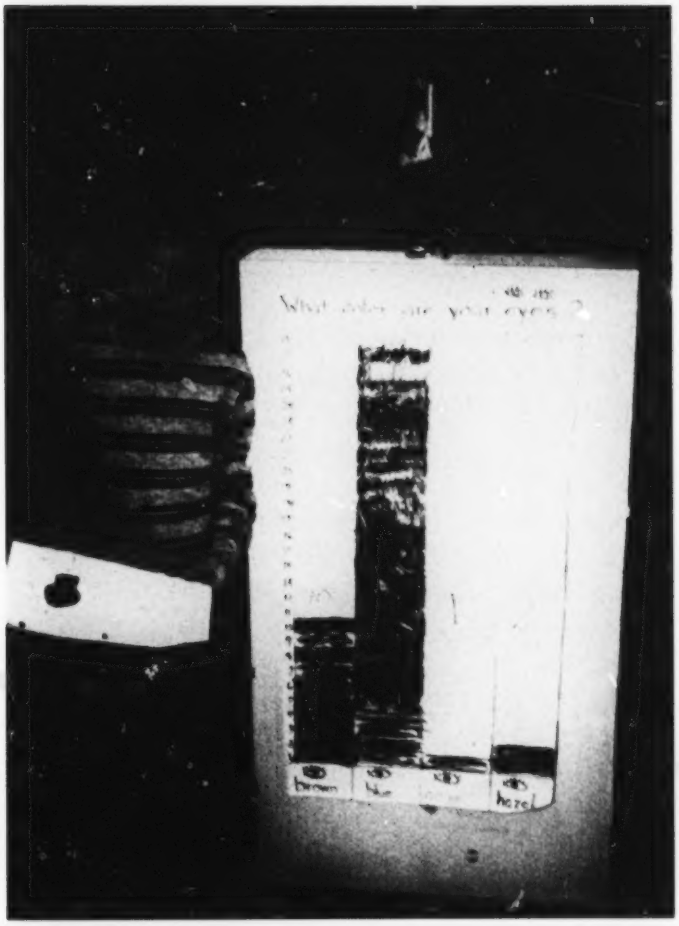
Deborah Gerrior Thomas

Multi-Grade Teaching in an Activity-Based Classroom

For the past four years, we have taught across the hall from each other at Millville Elementary School. Our doors were always open and we shared strategies, resources planning and children, on an ongoing basis. Part of our day we shared activity-based settings and on special occasions we shared for a full day. Therefore, our transition to working as a team was not a spur-of-the-moment decision.

This year, we made the decision to work together full time in a team teaching situation which is totally activity-based. Our thirty-eight students range in age from four to eight.

Our classroom was originally two classrooms but now has part of the wall removed, giving us a large area in which to work. In one of the areas, we have a conference centre where there are enough tables and chairs to accommodate all the students at one time if we want. The room consists of centres, and students choose in which centre they would like to work. There is a maximum number of students allowed to work at one centre at any given time.



We plan our units long-term, usually by the month, and we plan weekly which children receive individual attention each day. Who will be conferenced and who will be read to is planned at the end of each day. Everything done in the classroom is shared between the two of us. If one is reading to an individual or a small group, the other is

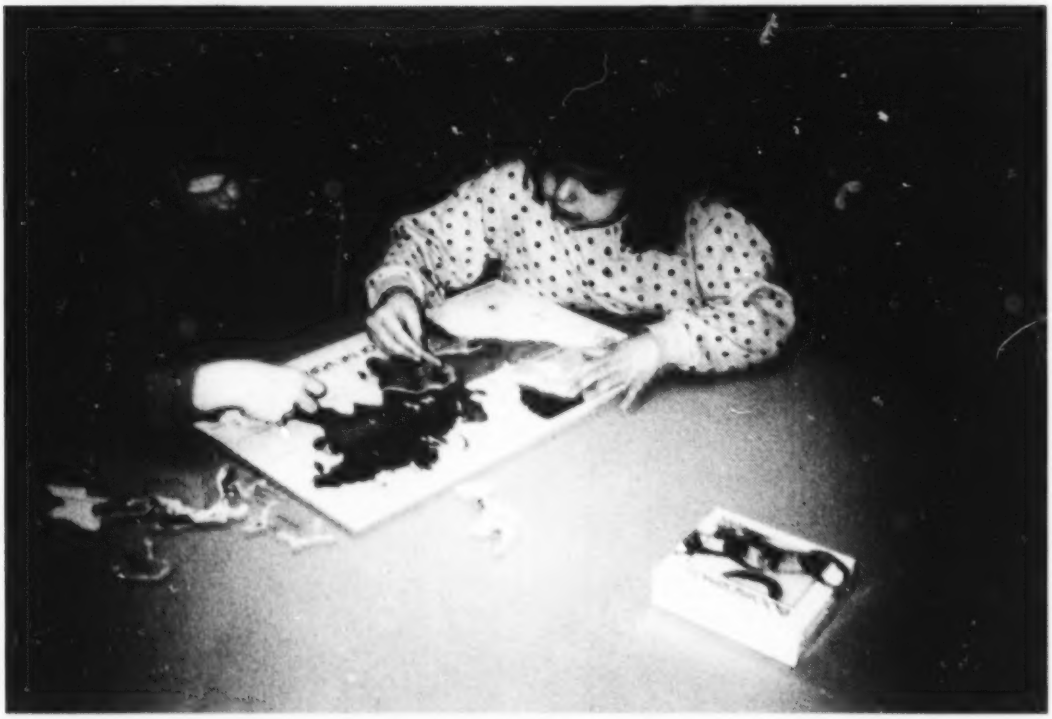
monitoring the classroom. If one does the opening exercises, the other is welcoming stragglers, talking to parents or assigning duties to volunteers.

Besides the two us, parent volunteers are part of our daily program. We also receive support from a teacher assistant on a regular basis.

At the beginning of the year, the maintenance of the classroom took a great deal of time. Over the months, the children have learned to help keep the classroom neat and safe.

In the fall, many parents expressed concern over the changes in approach that we had made. The idea of having the young children with the older ones was worrisome for the parents of the kindergarten students. For the parents of the older children, the idea of "playing" confused and worried them, as they were concerned about the level of their children's academic learning. We took a stand on our beliefs and set out to make the parents more aware of the program and its benefits. We invited them to visit at any time. We held parent information meetings and we sent home articles on early childhood education. We talked with them daily as they delivered and picked up their children at the school.

At reporting time, the parents expressed their satisfaction with the new anecdotal report card. At the parent-teacher interviews, they told us that their children were



not complaining about coming to school. They were not bored or frustrated and they were learning a lot.

Parents find that the children are looking after their own things at home and are using reading skills at home with the newspapers, books from school, letters from relatives and the like. They appear to have a deeper appreciation of print.

The most important aspect of this style of teaching is seeing the daily successes of the students, the good feeling they have about themselves, and their respect and compassion for their peers. "Good drawing," one student says to another about their work on the weather calendar.

Activity-based classrooms take a lot of time and a lot of work, both physically and mentally. We go home tired each night, but it is a good tiredness.

Maxine Brewer & Brenda Jardine

K-2: A Parent's View

Last September my husband and I enrolled our almost-five-year-old son in kindergarten. Since Jeremy is multiply handicapped, (severe cerebral palsy, paralysis in all four limbs, and blind, with extremely sensitive hearing), I stayed with him at school for six weeks in order to show the teacher's assistant how to meet and deal with his special needs.

Jeremy's new classroom was unlike any I had ever seen in the years that our other four children were in school. For beginners, this classroom was to meet the needs of kindergarten as well as grade one and two students. The number of students was also a surprise, forty in all. There is not one, but, two teachers (co-teachers) in the class, as well as the teacher's assistant.

The classroom itself consists of two large rooms, with the dividing wall removed. The largest area is called the conference room, where there are several low, round tables with chairs. There are no assigned seats; the children may choose where they sit and with whom. This is where the day begins.

The rest of the room is divided into various learning centres, such as: table-top activities, snack centre, play dough, home centre, sand table, computer centre, water table, math centre, blocks, science centre, collage, reading centre, social studies, listening centre and art centre. A carpeted area of the room provides a relaxed atmosphere where the children can sit on the floor and listen to stories, read to the class, sing, learn French, etc.

From the moment I walked into that classroom, I was impressed. The children were all greeted individually as they entered the room and made to feel very welcome. The teachers had obviously planned ahead because the day was amazingly well organized and went very smoothly. Most

of the children arrived with bookbags full of the list supplies and these were pooled and put away.

Right from the beginning the children were being taught responsibility, fair play and respect for one another and themselves. I wanted the teacher's assistant to shoulder the responsibility of caring for Jeremy, so I tried as much as possible to stay at a distance. This afforded me an opportunity to get to know some of the children I wasn't familiar with, as well as observe this new learning method. I think what impressed me the most was that the children were learning without realizing it. For example, something as simple as discussing the week's snack menu is a wonderful learning experience, talking about nutrition, texture, shape, quantity, division — and the learning goes on. There doesn't seem to be a lot of competition between the children; the competition seems to be within the individual to improve his or her self.

In the first couple of weeks I saw amazing improvement in social skills, and, as time passed, new friendships developing. Reading skills improved and progress in activities was noted. A good sense of self-esteem is being planted within each student. I have never seen anyone being left out or ridiculed.

As a child, I was labelled a slow learner. Later in life it was discovered that I have a mild form of dyslexia. Reading and spelling were extremely difficult for me and as a result I had very low self-esteem. I wish I had had the opportunity to learn in this type of atmosphere, and not that of being constantly embarrassed because I didn't measure up to the "smart" kids in the class.

This method of learning seems to lend itself well to the gifted child as well as those with learning difficulties. My husband and I were a little apprehensive about sending Jeremy to school. We couldn't have been more wrong. Jeremy thoroughly enjoys everyone and everything at school, even fire drills. His tolerance to sound has improved immensely, he has a longer attention span and is more interested in exploring his surroundings. Jeremy is gaining better motor control, both large and small. He has broadened interests and is generally a more relaxed and happy child. He has become much more responsive; although he does not talk, he is vocalizing more and seems to recognize everyone in class by name and voice. As well as the teachers, the children have encouraged Jeremy a great deal and often cheer and applaud when he accomplishes a task.

In conclusion, the K-2 Classroom in the Millville Elementary School is great. I honestly feel privileged to have my son a part of it, and I know all of his classmates are getting a good grounding in their education.

Valerie French